

## **Dance Department History Project 2010-2011**

**Transcribed interview of Cathy Black on November 18, 2010**

**Interviewed by Susanne Johnson Davis**

**When and where did you attend undergrad school?**

My undergrad schooling was at the University of Edmonton in Alberta, Canada.

**Where did you attend graduate school?**

The University of Utah.

**Who were your administrators during your tenure at BYU?**

I've had about five deans of the colleges, six including Dean Jones. I started with Dean Hartvigsen in the College of Health and Human Performance, then Dean Jensen, Dean Roundy, Dean Conlee, and Dean Sara Lee Gibb. At the end of Sara Lee's tenure, we moved colleges to the College of Fine Arts and Communications, where Dean Jones is Dean. Those are all the deans since I came in 1972.

**What chairs did you have in the dance department?**

We had Phyllis Jacobsen for the longest amount of time. I think it was her first year in 1972. Prior to that, we were part of Physical Education, and Leona Holbrook was department chair before Phyllis. After Phyllis, we had Sara Lee Gibb, but she wasn't around for too long, because she became Dean around 1999 and Lee Wakefield became the department chair. He is about to leave that position in a month and we don't know who our next department chair is going to be yet.

**When did you begin your employment at BYU?**

1972, in the summer.

**Did you replace anyone at that time?**

I actually have a story about that. Being from Canada, I wasn't able to stay in this country after I did my graduate work except for that program foreigners could take advantage of, which was an 18 month opportunity to work in the area you just graduated in, so you could refine your skills before going back to your native country. So I said, "Well, I am going to the first place that accepts me." I filled out the papers, first at the University of Maryland. One day I was watching the Woodbury Dance Company in practice, and Dee Winterton was part of that company. He asked Joanne Woodbury if they had anyone to send down because Sara Lee Gibb was going on maternity leave and was going to be gone for that one year.

They asked if I was interested; I said I was and the rest is history. I came for a year and Sara Lee decided she needed to stay home longer. I don't remember how many years it was maybe three, five. Then what had to happen was that Dean Jensen had the opportunity, while Sara Lee was still away, to ask me to stay for a little longer. But he had to go to Denver to do it, because that's where all the government stuff had to be done. He would go there every spring to see if he could get a renewal.

It was getting to maybe four years and he came back one time, and said, "Why don't you just get married? It'd be so much easier for me."

I said "I'm trying!" (chuckles) Shortly after that, I got married and the rest is history.

That's how I came to BYU. When I first came, I wasn't LDS. I probably experienced the most missionaries of anyone because they were all my students. I remember the first day of class, the word had gotten out that this new teacher was not LDS.

The first thing they said was, "Well, we always say prayers before we start class. So is it alright if we said a prayer in this class?"

I said, "Yes, that would be fine."

So we had a prayer every day and everybody was very kind to me. They were like missionaries and shared the religion and how the people were. By the end of the first year, I joined the church.

### **Why did you decide to come to BYU? What were your dreams? Have they been fulfilled?**

Like I said, I came thinking I'd be at BYU for a year, so I didn't really have dreams. I was just here doing things and doing pieces of choreography. At that time, they had a Mormon Arts Festival, and it went on for several years. Lee, who was department chair at that time, was getting together pieces of dance to go on this festival. I asked him if I could choreograph something for the festival, which I think he wouldn't have minded, but it was religious subject material. In graduate school, my master's degree and my thesis was on liturgical dance. I performed with liturgical dance and I had my students and colleagues perform in my performance thesis which was done in an episcopal theatre in Salt Lake City.

I really had some experience with liturgical dance, or dance in religion, but I wasn't exactly the golden convert either. I think Lee was afraid I didn't understand the religion enough to represent it through dance. However, along the way, Pat Debenham was in the class where we said the prayer, and so was Cathy Parsons, who later became Cathy Debenham. Pat was pretty influential in my conversion process, so I went to him and said, "Pat, I want to do a dance about the First Vision. If you help me, I will listen about your church." So we did that dance together. Well, we didn't do it together. I created it, and he was Joseph Smith, and he portrayed the First Vision in the grove.

By then, it was about time for me to go because I was going to go home for the summer, to be back in the fall.

I said, "What should I do?"

By this time, we had been going to church together, and he said I needed to keep going to church, "So it won't fade away and you'll be fine until you're really ready."

Then I went to California to a dance workshop. In grad school, they always told us that being an artist was the best thing you could be because you could be like a prophet and change the world. I wanted to be an artist so I went to this workshop. I would sneak into the Mormon Church, which was behind the dorms I was in. I would sneak in and sneak out. I never talked to anybody, I would just listen to the sermon.

One day, I took a handful of nickels and dimes, and I went to a pay phone and put the money in.

I said, "This is going to be a strange call, but I am interested in the church and I want to be baptized. Can you tell me what I need to do to be baptized?"

The person said, "Just a minute. Let me see if I can find somebody."

They gave me a phone number, and finally I got ahold of a bishop of the Church I had been sneaking into all summer. We made an appointment, but I didn't want to be baptized here in Utah because I just thought it'd be a circus, and I wanted it to be a little more private.

This is what I was thinking, "They would have been so happy, and they would have won."

I was sitting across the way from this bishop, and we were talking and I told him all the reasons I was afraid of joining the church. There was family home evening on Monday, Mutual on Tuesday, and you couldn't rehearse on Sunday. How could you be an artist if you couldn't do that?

He said, "You know, I really understand you, because I am a theater professor. Do you know Dee Winterton?"

I said, "Yes, I do." He was a friend of Dee Winterton, and that was a nice connection.

He said, "Let me tell you why you are afraid." He brought up all these things and he said, "You know, if you join this church, there will be ways to do all these things. The church will not only not be in your way, but will be there to help you. The Lord will be there to help you."

I asked him to baptize me, and he said yes.

I had been writing letters back to Pat, and I had timed it so that as we were sending letters back, he would get the letter about my baptism on the day I was getting baptized, and he would think of me being baptized. He had a friend, Hyrum, who lived in Long Beach, where all of this had been going on. His mother had just given him some money, since he was going anyway, but when they discovered I was getting baptized (the letter got there two days early), they got in the car and drove to Long Beach. I went through the whole baptism process.

There was another part too. I decided the next year to have a roommate, called Claudia Hyatt. The morning of my baptism, I got a phone call from her.

She said, "Hi Cath! What are you doing tonight? I'm in California. Want to go to Disneyland?"

I told her I was getting baptized.

She said, "Woah!" and she was there at my baptism, so I was able to watch her and have her be a friend.

After, she started gesturing during the confirmation and she pointed over and there was Pat and Hyrum. I actually had three of my closest people with me when I didn't want anybody there; but I was really glad I had them there.

I like to tell that story because, I'm not saying it was an accomplishment, but it was a great blessing, of course. I really think I would never have joined the church had that opportunity not come around. Of course, since then I have been married, I've had children, and they are all faithful in the church. That's pretty good.

### **Who were your contemporary faculty members in department of dance?**

At first, it wasn't Sara Lee because I was replacing her. Lee took over her position as department chair. But by the time she came back, I guess we had expanded the department a bit, because I didn't have to leave, and Abby Fiat came to do her graduate work, I think. Or after she did her grad work here, which started about 1980; I think that's right.

In the first years, it was Dee, myself, and a woman I actually had been at school with at the University of Utah whose name was Rita Dismar. She is married now and I don't think Dismar is her married name. She was in charge of one of the two performing groups, Orchesis, and Modern Dance Company. Lee took charge of Orchesis and I took charge of the second Modern Dance company after she left. She was in charge of the second dance company before I came. She got married, and had children, and didn't stay long.

After graduate school, we hired Abby and during that time Pat Debenham was here. I can't put dates on this exactly, but I do know that I worked with Abby Fiat for a few years before she went to the University of Utah. Somewhere in that stream of things, Pat went to UCLA to get his master's degree. When he came back, he was hired and so he was another person. Cathy Debenham did her graduate degree here with Leona Holbrook and started the Dancer's Company. We didn't have Orchesis anymore, we had the Dancer's Company which became the touring and performing company. We still had the second string company, but it had a different name. I think it was called Dancer's Showcase, but it might not have been, the name might have stayed the same and the concerts was called that.

In any case, I was in charge of them for quite a while, and those were the people I worked with in the dance department. Sandy Allen was here but we weren't so connected as we are now. In ballroom I think it was the Emersons that were here. This was before Lee Wakefield was here as a faculty member. Moore, who was a professional ballroom dancer was involved a bit, too. Ben de Hoyas was

here and also Alma Heaton and they were dealing with recreational dance. So that's what it was when I came.

### **What facilities did you work and teach in?**

In those days, as a I remember, we only had rooms 185 and 187 in the Richards Building to work in. I think later they put the additions in and we had those new rooms to practice in, like the tap room. I don't remember having a classroom, but we must have because it wasn't too long. Claudia Rowley was also a faculty member, the one that came to my baptism, and was teaching the Cougarettes and dance history. Then she stopped teaching dance history and I took that over. We couldn't have done that without a classroom; maybe it was the same one we have now, which is 257.

### **Can you describe the curriculum of the classes you taught and some of the methods of teaching that you used?**

Well, I've been here now thirty-eight years, so obviously I hoped the methods would change with time. When I first came, I was the kind of teacher like they have at the University of Utah, with technique and composition classes. That's where I learned about it. I certainly did have some modern dance training in Alberta, but it was very basic. There was no program, just an Orchesis class, maybe a modern dance class. I had grown up doing tap dancing mostly. I was most interested in that, because I had a terrific mentor who is still alive, eighty-five years old, who introduced me to modern dance.

She was in Wisconsin with Margaret H'Doubler at the same time Joanne Woodbury was there and they were friends. She brought Joanne to Canada for two workshops, and I decided I had to come and study with Joanne because I loved what she was doing and I loved her. So I was accepted to the U of U in 1970, the year Joanne took a leave of absence, but I got to have her the second year because it was a two year program at the time. She was influential in bringing me down here both in methodology and from Canada. Then I worked with Dee and he had his own methodology.

I don't quite know how to answer your question though. I taught technique, I taught composition, and eventually I got the opportunity to teach dance history, which I still like to do—dance history one and two now. In 1980, we applied for graduate programs, and we wanted to have an MFA program. But since we weren't in fine arts, the dean at that time would not allow an MFA degree outside of that college. That ended up being a very difficult situation in the future because many of us that are faculty members now were grad students here and got an MA degree, but not the MFA degree. As history unfolded, it was not a prestigious degree and at this point now, we have in our department three MFA degree people in our entire department. The rest are MAs.

The University doesn't hire MAs anymore, because they need the more professional MFA degrees. Had we been able to train our students with an MFA degree when we wanted to, I think things would be much different than what they are. I'm really sorry about that. I just don't know why they couldn't have somehow worked with us, but they didn't.

### **What technology did you use and how has technology changed and developed your courses?**

People today, not so much then, have had so much change and in so little time. I remember when I did my thesis, I had my cousin in Canada type it up, or maybe it was my bachelor's paper. I had a professional typist type up my thesis. How many changes can you get when you write your thesis? You really had to be thorough, but they also aren't as long and big as they were, since we have the computer.

So my answer is number one: the computer changed everything. You should have seen some of the posters I made, cartoon-pencil things that were ugly and not professional, but that's how it was then. You did things in a very rudimentary way.

The secretaries typed everything. You wrote everything out yourself if you couldn't type, and I couldn't type.

My dad told me when I was in high school and about to take typing, "Oh you can always hire a secretary. Take Latin."

So I did, but I never did learn to type except by hunt and peck, and I'm still like that. But you can make a lot of mistakes on the computer and still fix them. The secretaries typed everything and it was always double duty. You write it, they type it.

Of course, it's much better now, and we can make our own posters a lot better now. That's the technology I really appreciate now just because I am older, though there are many times I wish it would go away. I don't think it has made work easier. I think it has made it a lot more difficult and time consuming and stressful. But that's life, and you've got to move forward. I am very slow at moving forward because I am a perfectionist and I don't want to work with things I can't do. That's a bad character trait, but I have it.

I'm usually the last one to say, "Okay, I know I have to learn how to do this." Rather than "Wow! I can do this and this!" I'm kind of sorry I'm like that, but I am.

### **What was the focus on your research and creative work?**

Choreography, of course. When I was doing choreography, the most prolific kinds of choreography were the ones I extended past the University of Utah and dance and religion. We had some fine opportunities in the 1970s where we had the women's conference, and from the very first women's conference to the sixth one, the person in charge wanted to have dance as part of the conference. We would open up the conference with dances that had religious nature. I had several collaborative pieces I did with liturgical dance and dances I would do for musical theater, which I did quite a bit with the YA. Modern dance works I would do for classes I taught in dance ensemble. It used to be the Rita Dismar class, I moved into it when she left.

I'm interested in genealogy, which has taken me to Poland to do research on my ancestors, but not so much my ancestors as the dance of my ancestors. I was fortunate to find a man who is reconstructing these things to the best of his abilities. The culture that my grandparents grew up in was in Lemco, which was a minority group in Poland. They were deported out of Poland into what were German captures from the World War II. Anyway, I had the opportunity to go there a few times and participate in the dances of my ancestors of Poland and write an article about the person who was doing the research himself, and as far as I know, was the only one delving into it.

I wanted to write a paper about him and what he was doing. Normally, you can't do that because people want to know about the research, not the person doing the research. I had taken a leave of absence in 2003 to go and do the research. I couldn't write the paper, and I was getting nudges from the department chair. One day, I opened up a call for papers that was called, "Dance for Minorities."

I said, "This is it."

I wrote the whole paper about him, turned it in, it was accepted and they asked if I would consider putting it in the journal. I refined and expanded it and put in the journal. That was another high point. The journal was "The Cord Congress on Research and Dance Journal." That's a top tier journal in our field these days, at least one of them.

### **Can you think of other accomplishments you would like to share with us?**

My greatest accomplishment is humble. It is nothing really "kaboom." I think my greatest accomplishment is the teaching of all the students I've had in the nearly forty years I've been here.

I have received teaching awards on the department and college university levels. Well, I did bring them. This is the Alumni Professorship Award, and this is the Karl G. Maeser Award. I was

honored to get these.

It's nice to have that recognition, but I just I love my students. I love to help my students want to learn and love to learn. They can trust me; they can come to me whenever they have any issue. They can trust the confidential things they say will stop with me. I don't tend to be a rough teacher with deadlines. I want them to do their best work. I mean, what the heck, if they need a few more days and it's going to make a difference, then it's going to be a better paper and they're going to learn more. There's a warmth, connection with these interactions with people. If they need help like that again, they know that I will give it to them because it's not about power. It's about nurturing.

### **What over all these years, what has BYU given back to you?**

Number one, hundred percent, the Church. Of course, the Church. It has given me light, truth, and a group of people I did not ever believe existed on the earth—in terms of their kindness, their values, their love, their light, and you can't help but get that through osmosis. I think there is no way I would be the person I am today, if I had not been here. In terms of all those values I have embraced, they have softened me and warmed me and developed me into a person who I am much happier with than I was before I came here.

Another highlight I treasure was the chance to deliver a devotional address a few years ago, "Don't Miss the Miracle." There's no way I could have given that talk without all the learning I had accumulated.

I'm not saying I never heard of the Holy Ghost. I had grown up in the Russian Orthodox Church and they would always say "In the name of God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost," and that was as much as I knew about the Holy Ghost. Since I've been here, I feel like my gift from God is the Holy Ghost. I'm very close to the Holy Ghost. We adopted two children when we were fifty-three and fifty-seven when the Holy Ghost said we needed to get a couple of girls from Russia. It was instant and we both knew it and we did it. That's probably a very unusual and intense interaction with the Holy Ghost. It's always there for me, always. I was very grateful to be able to share some of those things as examples and maybe different ways of having people recognize the Holy Ghost with what I've gone through.